

NINE

The Stepping Stone

Larry Holmes, Gerry Cooney, and *Rocky*

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On June 11, 1982, Larry Holmes defeated Gerry Cooney in a heavyweight title fight that turned out to be boxing's last great black-white cultural event of the twentieth century. If you want to talk to Holmes about it now, you call the offices of Larry Holmes Enterprises in Easton, Pennsylvania. The secretary puts you through to his business manager, who determines whether it's worth the boss's while to talk to you. If all goes well, you make an appointment to call Holmes—or visit in person—during business hours later in the week. If Holmes has to go on the road for a promotional appearance, as he often does, it all takes longer. To reach Cooney you call the offices of the Fighters' Institute for Support and Training (FIST), the organization he founded to help boxers make the transition to life outside the ring. FIST has good intentions, but no real money yet. The cheerful woman who answers the phone gives you Cooney's cell phone number without bothering to find out what you want; you leave a message on his voice mail, then he calls you back from his car sometime and you talk as he drives around New Jersey, usually at night.

The one-time adversaries have become friends, but it still matters that Holmes won and Cooney lost, that Holmes is rich and Cooney is not, that Holmes held the heavyweight championship for seven years and Cooney never did. During the long, bitter runup to their fight, it seemed to matter most to just about everybody that Cooney is white and Holmes is black,

but they both have tried to put that particular aspect of their encounter behind them. They would like to think that they are better, wiser men than they were back then.

“Everything connected with the Cooney fight was race, race, race,” as Holmes put it in his autobiography.¹ That’s the one thing almost everybody knew about the fight in 1982, and that’s how it is still remembered. The most widely accepted version of this received wisdom (codified and restated recently by a documentary in HBO’s “Legendary Nights” series) has Don King, who handled Holmes, and Mike Jones and Dennis Rappaport, the Long Island real-estate men who handled Cooney, “turning it into a racial thing” in order to make more money. Cooney sees it that way now: “They did that, the guys managing me, and Don King. It had nothing to do with me; I never felt it that way, never thought about it that way, didn’t see it that way. I have nothing good to say about them.” Another version of the received wisdom blames American culture, not the promoters, for “turning it into a racial thing” because that’s what Americans do to boxing matches and anything else—sports, music, trials, elections, social class—that can be made to fit the bill. Holmes sees it that way now: “I realize what kind of a world we live in. I know this is a white man’s world. I know they gonna come first. I know white people wanted Cooney to kick my ass, and black people wanted me to kick his ass. That’s the way it is.”

Everything connected with the Holmes-Cooney bout seemed to be Rocky, Rocky, Rocky, too. That *Rocky* and its sequels somehow framed the fight’s meaning is the second thing that almost everybody knew about it at the time, and this assumption still shapes popular memory of it. For some, Cooney was “a real-life Rocky.” For others, Cooney embodied the delusive Rocky fantasy, a revival of the old White Hope formula that calls for a white challenger to contest the heavyweight title—a traditional apogee of manhood—whenever it is held by a black man. The fighters themselves participated in fitting the Rocky template over their fight. Asked by Howard Cosell to predict the outcome, Cooney said, “I’m going to win. Did you see *Rocky II*? When his wife is in a coma, she lost the baby, and she says ‘Win! Win!’” After he lost to Holmes, Cooney said to Cosell, “There’s always room for *Rocky II*, right?” (Rocky, having lost an honorably close decision to the champion, Apollo Creed, at the end of *Rocky*, wins the rematch at the end of *Rocky II*.) Looking back on the way he felt as he prepared to fight Holmes, Cooney now says, “It was like the Rocky story being lived.” Holmes did not invoke Rocky as often as Cooney did, but directly after the fight Holmes did declare, “I have killed all the critics. Rocky, Sylvester Stallone, *Time* magazine, *Sports Illustrated*”—an odd list of critics, headed by the fictional character who loomed over the bout, the actor who played him, and two magazines that put Cooney and/or Stallone, not Holmes, on their covers before the fight.²